DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 701 PS 031 421

TITLE	Creating a Unified, Comprehensive System of Early Childhood Education.
INSTITUTION	National Association of State Boards of Education, Alexandria, VA.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	27p.; Supported by the Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. This report also received support through a grant from the Policymaker Partnership for Implementing IDEA.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association of State Boards of Education, 277 South Washington Street, Suite 100, Alexandria, VA 22314. Tel: 703-684-4000; Fax: 703-836-2313; Web site: http://www.nasbe.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	Change Strategies; *Delivery Systems; *Early Childhood Education; Educational Improvement; Educational Planning; Educational Quality; Interviews; *Partnerships in Education; Program Evaluation; *Public Policy; *Statewide Planning; Strategic Planning; Surveys; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	*Conceptual Frameworks

ABSTRACT

The Early Childhood Education Network was created as a result of a year-long collaborative project between the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and the Policymaker Partnership to help states create an infrastructure to support the delivery of quality services to children and their families. The boards of education in six participating states (Kansas, Louisiana, Illinois, Massachusetts, Ohio, Wyoming) received seed grants to assist with the design and implementation of strategic, results-oriented action steps to enhance the coherence and quality of early childhood education in the state. This report describes the research, policy issues, and the conceptual framework that served as the basis for how NASBE led states through strategic interventions to address critical issues in early childhood education. Specific steps are outlined to help states achieve targeted objectives. The report highlights the accomplishments of each Network state and the primary findings based on surveys and interviews of policymakers and agency staff. It is noted that states moved quickly to establish effective partnerships among policymakers, service coordinators, practitioners, and families. States accomplished their goals and put into place plans for continued expansion and implementation of activities to coordinate and improve the quality of their early childhood education systems. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications for enhancing and expanding the multi-step process of developing cohesive early childhood education policies and programs in states across the country. (Contains 27 endnotes.) (KB)

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Acknowledgments

The Early Childhood Education Network and this report were supported through a grant from the Policymaker Partnership for Implementing IDEA and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The Policymaker Partnership at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education is education's policy connection to the 1997 amendments of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Policymaker Partnership is one of four linked projects funded by OSEP.

NASBE would also like to acknowledge the support of the National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center in the work of this project. The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center supports the implementation of the early childhood provisions of IDEA. The Center's mission is to strengthen service systems to ensure that children with disabilities (birth through five) and their families receive and benefit from high-quality, culturally appropriate, and family-centered supports and services.

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Overview

Studies show that high-quality services for young children from low-income families can positively impact their later chances in school and adult life. Furthermore, there is widespread acceptance that early childhood interventions are important. Research shows, however, that the vast majority of children receive services that are at best mediocre and more often, of poor quality.

One significant roadblock to improving quality is the fragmentation in policies and practices across states and communities, particularly those serving children from low-income homes. For example, the Children's Defense Fund found that prekindergarten policies differ from state to state on almost every count, including: original goals, administrative structures, distribution of funds, the types of agencies operating programs, quality standards, and the scope of supports provided to children and families.

Most states have spent their time primarily developing different aspects of programs rather than focusing on the system as a whole. One key unifying element is statewide program standards. Indeed, distinguished scholars in the field of early childhood education recommend that all states develop program standards for early childhood programs and monitor their implementation.

In March 2001, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE)—in collaboration with the Policymaker Partnership (PMP)—initiated a project to help states increase their ability to create integrated, high-quality early childhood education policies, programs, and services for young children.

The year-long project resulted in the creation of the Early Childhood Education Network, a group focused on helping states create an infrastructure to support the delivery of quality services to children and their families. Project staff worked with state board of education members, state education agency staff, and staff from other state agencies charged with administering early childhood education programs in each of the six participating states. Each state board received a $10,000 seed grant to assist with the design and implementation of strategic, results-oriented action steps that would enhance the coherence and quality of early childhood education in the state.

The Network states took important steps to promote effective, integrated early childhood policies and programs. A series of formative and summative evaluations indicated that the states moved quickly to establish effective partnerships among policymakers,

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service coordinators, practitioners, and families. Not only did the states accomplish the goals outlined in their original proposals, they also put into place plans for the continued expansion and implementation of activities to coordinate and improve the quality of their early childhood education systems.

This report describes the research, policy issues, and the conceptual framework that served as the basis for how NASBE led states through strategic interventions to address critical issues in early childhood education. Specific steps are outlined to help states achieve their targeted objectives. The report highlights the accomplishments of each Network state and the primary findings based on surveys and interviews of policymakers and agency staff. Finally, we discuss the implications for enhancing and expanding this multi-step process in developing cohesive early childhood education policies and programs in states across the country.

Statement of Need

During the last several years, policymakers and the public have become increasingly aware of the importance of early intervention and education. Despite the large percentage of children in the United States—particularly those living in poverty—who do not have access to high-quality early childhood programs, our nation produces the most influential body of research in the world relating to the field of early childhood development and education.[1] Experimental and quasi-experimental studies have established compelling evidence that comprehensive preschool education and services can enhance cognitive, social, language, and literacy development.[2]

This extensive body of literature has increased our understanding of how children's early life experiences translate to later school success.[3] High-quality preschool programs and services are associated with higher math and reading scores, stronger learning skills, increased creativity, better school attendance, improved health, and greater involvement by parents in their children's education.[4] For example, Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williamson examined National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test score trends across participating states from 1990 through 1996 and found that higher public prekindergarten participation was one of the common features among states scoring above the median.[5]

The public education system has become more involved, both directly and indirectly, in the pre-primary years. In 1998, approximately 44 states reported to the National Governors' Association that they were working on child care quality issues. During the last decade,

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state early childhood spending expanded by nearly $1 billion, or 2.5 times as much as at the beginning of the decade. The number of children who are participating in state programs has increased proportionally from approximately 290,000 to 725,000. Yet, most state-funded programs still serve only a small percentage of the population that would benefit from prekindergarten education and services. Only 45 percent of low-income three- to five-year-olds are enrolled in preschool programs, in contrast to 73 percent of middle-income children in that age group. Further, many programs fail to provide sufficient assurances of quality.

There is a need for a comprehensive infrastructure to support early childhood programs—particularly for children living in poverty. However, state early childhood systems tend to be uncoordinated, underfunded, and inconsistent in their aims, efficacy, and ability to help children enter the education system ready to learn. With increased dissemination of information about the relationship between early learning experiences and later education outcomes, issues have emerged regarding the extensive fragmentation in policies and practices across states and communities.[6]

We continue to face two important questions: How can we re-envision the current state early childhood infrastructure to include all young children and to establish interagency collaboration and coordinate system elements? And, what role does policy play in pressing for fundamental and complex changes in the delivery of existing programs and services?

At this point, most states are only in the initial stages of developing their infrastructure for comprehensive, integrated early childhood programs and services. In a study of three states, Schumacher, Greenberg, and Lombardi outlined the major challenges faced by coordinated service models.[7] They include developing a comprehensive vision that encompasses school readiness, merging funding streams that target different goals, and coordinating delivery systems in which particular components have separate administrators and separate missions and programs. In particular, categorical funding programs such as special education and Title I continue to operate largely in isolation from other "regular education" preschool initiatives.

The NASBE Project

Policies are more likely to be implemented when directives are paired with incremental changes.[8] Therefore, NASBE's framework for its early childhood project established a model that would inform state board policy of early childhood and alternative service programs (e.g., special education and Title I) through a series of incremental, strategic activities. Following are the three main stages of the project.

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"When policy directives pair a clear implementation goal with tractable procedures…they are more likely to be implemented, in part because in such cases the principals can monitor their agents' behavior more effectively and efficiently."

J. P. Spillane, B. J. Reiser, and T. Reimer, "Policy Implementation and Cognition: Reframing and Refocusing Implementation Research."

Stage 1

NASBE engaged state teams, led by state board members, in a "sense-making" process designed to identify the key concepts involved in early childhood education programs (e.g., "ready to learn," "seamless transition," "continuum of services") and the relationships among those concepts across multiple human services systems.

Stage 2

Project staff used a results-oriented process to guide the creation and work of the Network states. It required states to commit to a team approach, establish ongoing collaborative partnerships, and to develop and implement specific action plans to align federal and state policies and programs. NASBE provided oversight and facilitated implementation through a series of incremental interventions at key points in the networking and planning process. This helped to ensure collaborative partnerships, focused and targeted action, involvement of state authority through the state board, and ongoing evaluation.

Stage 3

State board of education members played a pivotal role in the creation of the Early Childhood Education Network. With the increased emphasis on consolidating and aligning federal and state resources and delivery systems, state boards of education are uniquely positioned to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education programs. They have broad oversight for education standards and licensure, program accreditation, and facility utilization. Board members, coupled with staff and other stakeholders, can develop high-quality early childhood policies, and they can lobby effectively for full funding. Project evaluations indicated that the state boards played a significant role in leveraging their authority to strengthen partnerships, create a common vision, codify a single set of standards and readiness indicators, and establish certification requirements for personnel.

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Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the project focused on key elements of the early childhood infrastructure that are related to producing positive outcomes for children. It integrated the various frames of reference used in the traditional paradigm of serving children through categorical identification.[10] For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates the provision of a free, appropriate public education for children identified as eligible for special education services. Yet, research has shown that populations served through other funding streams, such as Title I and Head Start, share many of the same characteristics and developmental profiles as children with special needs.[11]

The framework presented at the initial conference of the Early Childhood Education Network incorporated the following elements:

Quality Standards to Ensure Readiness to Learn

States must set consistent guidelines and standards that address social and emotional development, health and safety, nutrition, education, and curriculum content that will prepare all young children for formal schooling.

Although federal programs such as Head Start, Title I, and Parts B and C of IDEA specify their own sets of standards and indicators for program approval, there is considerable overlap in what constitutes quality programs and services for children.

One critical area that states need to address in the development of standards is emergent literacy. NASBE provided the Network participants with specific information compiled from findings regarding what science tells us about how children learn to read. For example, the National Research Council in 1998 conducted an exhaustive review of precursor literacy skills in young children.[12] Its report makes a compelling case for providing high-quality preschool literacy instruction to ensure reading proficiency.

The Council examined the preponderance of evidence in the subject of reading to formulate recommendations for enhancing literacy for young children. Its findings include:

- Differences in literacy achievement among children as a result of socioeconomic status are pronounced and continue throughout schooling.
- There is little evidence that children experiencing difficulties learning to

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read require radically different forms of instruction than children at low risk.

- The likelihood of high school graduation can be reasonably predicted by assessing reading skill at the end of grade three.

Children benefit from early childhood experiences that foster language development, instill a motivation to read, and establish a link between print and spoken words.[13] States need to develop early learning guidelines for literacy, language, and prereading skills activities that align with K-12 standards.[14]

Comprehensive, Integrated Services

States must develop a comprehensive vision that embraces the goal of school readiness for all children.

Most states have funded some form of early childhood education for a portion of their three- and four-year-old population. In addition, under the provisions of Parts B and C of IDEA, the state education agency is required to provide early childhood intervention and services for children with disabilities and their families. These programs vary widely with respect to administrative organization, delivery systems, funding sources, mission, and goals.

A comprehensive system must balance public and private responsibility; address the needs of all young children; and attend to the range of regulatory and licensing differences across federal, state, public, and private programs. This will require ongoing efforts from the public, policymakers, and a broad range of stakeholders.

Results-based Orientation

Data management systems must support comprehensive program evaluation, as well as provide the information necessary for cross-cutting analysis.

Federal and state funding for early childhood education currently approaches $18 billion. With these growing allocations comes increased pressure to document how funds are spent, to provide evidence that children are experiencing positive outcomes, and to make this information available to both the public and policymakers. According to Shepard, Taylor, and Kagan, few states have reported on initiatives related specifically to meeting National Education Goal 1: Ready to Learn.[15]

Programs that provide services for children with identified special needs must address specific state and local indicators to maximize the extent to which these children can succeed in inclusive settings. In addition, education professionals must receive better training in the use of such developmentally appropriate tools as curriculum-embedded assessments, portfolios, the Work Sampling System, and the High/Scope Child Observation Record.[16]

Professional Development

State education agencies must establish standards to ensure that personnel who provide special education and related services are qualified.[17]

Successful preschool programs with staff who are well trained in effective, developmentally appropriate practices can make a significant difference in children's long-term school performance.[18] Quality staffing is essential if early childhood education programs are to provide real benefits.

Some federal and state programs set standards for staff certification. Yet, significant differences in staffing requirements exist across state and federal funding streams. Integrated programs allow both children and staff to benefit from access to more highly trained personnel. For example, states can apply some of the services paid for with Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) money in order to expand the availability of services that meet Head

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Start performance standards. And, IDEA funds can be used to increase the training available for staff and parents.

Only a few states have adopted licensure standards that demonstrate either a clear relationship between early childhood educators and early childhood special educators or the unification of those fields in a single license.[19] Furthermore, personnel standards should address how early childhood educators effectively translate research on the precursors of literacy into everyday practice with young children.

Access and Equity

States must experiment with new structures to increase access to early education programs.

Administrative and survey data indicate that a large number of children who would benefit from quality early education services do not have access to them. This will require more coordinated planning among state policymakers and administrators, as well as dedicating staff and resources to provide quality technical assistance. It will also require that informational materials are provided in a variety of languages, formats, and locations as stipulated under the provisions of IDEA.

Funding

States must maximize resources by using multiple funding streams creatively across all programs.

This includes using CCDF and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) regulations to increase the ease of blending subsidy dollars into other program funding streams. States should require the development of program standards as a condition of funding. For example, special education funding is contingent on compliance with program and service standards as delineated under IDEA.

Invitational Conference

NASBE, in collaboration with the Policymaker Partnership, conducted an invitational conference in spring 2001. That conference, which was open to all states, required each participating state to send a cross-agency team that was headed by a member of the state board of education. Team members included state education and health and human services department personnel, special education directors, and/or other key education players. In follow-up phone interviews conducted three months after the grant awards, the states consistently reported that the only major barrier to achieving the project goals was the initial step of formulating the cross-agency team.

The comprehensive team approach was intended to facilitate the development of coalitions and relationships that could advance the ideas generated by participants once they returned to their states. The conference afforded an interactive process

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designed to help team members make sense of information from several perspectives—first, as one who serves in a particular role as a policymaker or state administrator; and second, as a team member charged with reaching a specific goal.

The conference's main objectives were to:

- Establish state teams and provide the opportunity for cross-agency dialogue concerning early childhood education and services;
- Provide information about early childhood education policies, research-based practices, and recommended policies and practices designed to coordinate service delivery (e.g., inclusive settings for children with disabilities, blending funding streams); and
- Facilitate initial planning for further seed grant applications.

The intent was to front-load critical information about research on quality education programs and provide a conceptual framework for integrating multiple systems. The primary focus for all of the initiatives was National Education Goal 1: Ready to Learn, which states that "all children will have access to high-quality and developmentally appropriate preschool programs that help prepare children for school."

The conference provided the teams with information on early childhood programs and issues that focused on the similarities among the different systems. Particular attention was paid to merging systems that target special populations (e.g., special education, Title I, Head Start) with general, universal prekindergarten initiatives. The emphasis was on how to identify common resources and align policies in order to mitigate fragmentation and duplication of services.

It was particularly important that state board members understand common components across multiple systems, given their authority for statewide implementation of categorical programs. For example, IDEA specifically states that students with disabilities must be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE):

> [T]o the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are non-disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (IDEA, 1990, sec. 1412(5)).

The Part B regulations state clearly that the LRE requirements apply to preschoolers between the ages of three and five who have disabilities. A continuum of alternative placements must be available to meet the needs of these children. Further, research indicates that inclusive programs provide higher quality services to children with disabilities.[20]

Yet states and local programs vary widely in the degree to which programs provide a full range of services through partnerships with other agencies or through alignment with federal initiatives such as Title I, IDEA, or Even Start.[21]

At the conference, teams of state education policymakers began to develop state action plans related to early childhood and special education policies. They outlined specific plans for coordinating opportunities to interact and articulate needs and issues from the range of perspectives represented in the teams. They identified gaps in policies and services within their state, and they began action planning to design coordinated state systems for providing education to children with and without disabilities.

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Seed Grants to States

Following the conference, NASBE issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to the state boards of education that were represented at the conference. This was critical to ensuring an ongoing commitment to working in partnerships with policymakers, agency staff, practitioners, and families. It also helped to delineate specific gaps in the coordinated service systems and determine the actions needed to enhance the quality and comprehensiveness of existing early childhood policies.

Louisiana, Wyoming, Kansas, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Illinois received technical assistance awards of $10,000 each to target specific early childhood education issues, involve policymakers in cross-partnership efforts, and maximize resources for developing coordinated policies. The application review panel identified the critical elements these states needed to address in order to achieve successful outcomes. Some were generic, such as how families and parents would be involved and how activities would ensure inclusion of diverse groups, including families of children with disabilities. Other issues were particular to the activities and deliverables outlined in the individual state proposals.

In some cases, grantees were provided with immediate technical assistance in establishing partnerships and strategizing on how to implement their action steps. Receipt of the balance of the award was contingent on completion of the initial project activities and a written response that addressed areas of concern. In subsequent interviews and focus groups the states reported that the ongoing feedback and technical support helped them sustain their momentum.

The grant process afforded states sufficient flexibility to target a range of activities and create strategies in concert with their overall policy and administrative structures. For example, the Wyoming team identified the need to develop a comprehensive statewide child care database aimed at making services to young children and their families more efficient, demonstrating effective programs and services, and determining gaps in the current services. The information would be used to support systematic planning and project funding. In Louisiana, an interagency group developed a long-term vision for early childhood education.

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NASBE/PMP State Seed Grant Early Childhood and Special Education Systems

State	Purpose	Grant Objectives
Louisiana	Support a cross-agency partnership in implementing new voluntary preschool legislation.	Build the infrastructure for state and regional collaboration necessary to support the new legislation through: • Cross-agency state planning meetings; • Regional information meetings to build regional partnerships; and • Facilitating local teams and creating a system for state support of local teams.
Wyoming	Enhance the state's ability to assist state decisionmakers in addressing policy issues related to the development of a comprehensive, coordinated infrastructure for early childhood education and special education services.	Collaboratively build a data collection system that supports efforts for systemic change and advances the governor's initiative for policy action that supports coordinated efforts.
Kansas	Increase coordination to link elements of myriad projects and develop an early childhood education infrastructure. Define school readiness and identify indicators. Develop and disseminate project materials.	With the State Children's Cabinet, co-sponsor a policy conference for state agency leaders and educators on school readiness.
Ohio	Support policy development for agency roles at key transition points. Define comprehensive services and inclusive practices. Coordinate planning and delivery of services and address restrictive licensing and program standards.	Collaboratively develop an initial policy statement. Take statewide testimony regarding the initial statement to inform a cogent state board policy statement that would be distributed widely.
Massachusetts	Improve transition between the early intervention and early childhood systems, with special focus on families as full partners.	Build on *Working Together*, the existing coalition, and actively involve the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Develop "family friendly" materials.
Illinois	Increase local awareness of the need to serve young children with disabilities in natural settings. Develop system for brokering services that would increase the participation of children with disabilities in community settings.	Create a state training curriculum that includes screening, referral and identification, needed services, curricular strategies, and inclusion of children with disabilities in community-based settings.

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Project Evaluation

NASBE collected information on the states' responses to the conference and the technical assistance they received; on their progress in establishing effective partnerships; on specific grant activities; and on the role of the state board of education. Data were gathered via phone interviews conducted in fall 2001 and spring 2002. In addition, states submitted final reports and deliverables in August 2002, at the end of the grant period.

Finally, NASBE and PMP invited the six Network states to present the outcomes of their initiatives at the 2002 Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) National Early Childhood Conference. In addition, focus groups were conducted with the state board members and the state agency staff members who served as the presenters. This forum provided the states with a valuable opportunity to report on the positive outcomes of the NASBE planning grants. They emphasized the valuable impact of establishing state networks to integrate early childhood education policies and programs.

During the course of the year, the states' responses remained consistent in regard to questions about formulating teams, developing partnerships, the role of the state board, and the efficacy of the seed grants. State agency staff said they found both the conference and the participation of state board of education members critical to developing and maintaining momentum for state initiatives in early childhood education. The initiatives were further solidified through the grants and the technical assistance.

What was most compelling from the first set of interviews was the level of state commitment to taking specific action to coordinate across a wide range of policymakers, agencies, and stakeholders, and to re-envision the delivery of high-quality services to all children. Although states received only $10,000 to conduct the activities, the amount of work accomplished in such a short period of time was considerable. Most of the states exceeded the objectives delineated in their initial proposals, and all have plans for continuing their efforts. Specific project outcomes are discussed below.

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State Project Outcomes

Louisiana

In May 2002, Louisiana passed legislation authorizing its Department of Education to use a competitive grant process to offer voluntary preschool in collaboration with Head Start. At the same time, the state attended the NASBE conference and decided to apply for a $10,000 grant to facilitate action planning for early childhood initiatives.

The state's application outlined collaborative activities—particularly with Head Start—that were designed to help implement the new legislation. The grant monies were used to conduct a facilitated session that brought together representatives from key agencies such as Head Start, the state board of education, the Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, and regional service providers.

Louisiana created a number of interagency groups to address state and local policies and guidelines that dealt with the birth to age eight population. These included:

- A standing committee comprising special education and regular education program supervisors, private providers, the Department of Health and Human Services, institutes of higher education, and Head Start program directors. The standing committee would provide input to the panel. It would submit the results of an independent evaluation of the new preschool programs; emphasize the importance of collaborative networks; recommend the creation of training programs for paraprofessional certification; recommend consistent guidelines and standards across agencies; and recommend that the Department of Social Services configure an interagency task force to address standards and guidelines for children, ages birth to four, consistent with those already developed for the age four to eight population.

- A TANF interagency group that included staff from the Department of Education and the Department of Social Services. The purpose was to explore how to coordinate funding streams and find linkages across services, including emergency housing, after-school and before-school tutoring, special education preschool, and prekindergarten programs.

- A Blue Ribbon Panel that would address related topics from prekindergarten through college.

Louisiana successfully completed an ambitious plan to implement the legislation on voluntary preschool programs.

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The legislation was amended to include utilization of any federally funded sites—primarily Head Start centers—for purposes of establishing preschool programs. The RFP included a section stipulating that local agencies, providers, and local education agencies were to collaborate in designing and delivering services. Eleven parishes were awarded grants to implement prekindergarten programs.

The state worked with each parish on site to coordinate local public and private service systems. Many of the preschool programs also shared IDEA Part B - 619 preschool funds to provide programs and services to children with and without disabilities in inclusive settings. An effective strategy for promoting local collaboration was to establish the long-term vision for a comprehensive system of early childhood services for these children.

During the grant period, Louisiana developed a set of exemplary standards for all prekindergarten programs that incorporated research-based instructional practices. The standards included specific recommendations on effective practices for developing language/literacy. They also recommended best practices by national experts (e.g., Division of Early Childhood) and the performance standards for preschool programs (e.g., Accreditation Standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Head Start Performance Standards).The standards were approved by the state board of education following a public comment period. They are being piloted in all 66 school systems during the 2002-03 school year. The final version will be reviewed by the standards committee and presented to the state board for final approval. Interviews with Louisiana representatives indicated that the state board of education played an essential role in developing public relations strategies and gaining public support for the prekindergarten initiatives.

Louisiana contracted with independent evaluators to determine the outcomes for children who participated in the pilot during the 2001-2002 year. An evaluation of the preschool pilot program demonstrated significant improvement between pre- and post-tests. The preschool cohorts will be followed as they progress through the early elementary grades. The state is conducting additional evaluations of the prekindergarten programs during the 2002-03 academic year. In addition, the evaluators are investigating the degree of collaboration by local agencies and providers and examining how children with special needs are included in prekindergarten programs.

As indicated in the state's final report on this project, the planning grant enhanced the process of working collaboratively to develop a comprehensive strategy for quality early childhood education and services in the state.[22]

Wyoming

In Wyoming, an early intervention/education team comprising representatives from four agencies, under two state departments, met monthly to address the development of an early education infrastructure. Team members addressed developing an interagency data management system for early childhood education programs and services. They outlined a general evaluation plan that considered the goals and objectives of multiple policies, programs, and initiatives.

The state used the grant funds to contract with an outside consultant to work with the state and local agencies and providers across Wyoming to assess the gaps in statewide data collection. The resulting report recommends that Wyoming develop a systems approach that fosters collaboration and cooperation between early childhood entities in order to share information and inform decisionmaking about programs and services. Furthermore, it recommends that key data be tied to National Education Goal 1: Ready to Learn.

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The team reviewed the consultant's report and mapped out a number of strategies for using data to evaluate a wide range of early childhood initiatives, including Child Find (Department of Human Services), Part B and Part C of IDEA, state improvement grants (under IDEA), kindergarten readiness initiative, literacy, and Head Start program standards. The state board of education also reviewed the consultant's report and recommendations, and will use those recommendations in developing standards, diagnostic assessments, and indicators.

In October 2002, Wyoming began collecting baseline data using the 2002 Kindergarten Readiness Survey.[23] Results of the survey have been used to configure professional development using the state improvement grant. In addition, the state collected pre- and post-test child development measures to evaluate the effectiveness of preschool programs. Multi-level data were disaggregated by district, program, and child. The information will be used to construct individual profiles of children and their special services or prereferral intervention needs.

The state board was very impressed with the outcomes of the project. The grant allowed Wyoming to gain valuable information needed to coordinate and improve the quality of data collection on early childhood programs and services.

Kansas

The governor and state legislature established a number of early childhood education initiatives in 1998. However, the projects and policies tended to be fragmented. The grant enabled the work group on early childhood to expand, thereby supporting the development of a cohesive, comprehensive infrastructure for early childhood education. The group is now working closely with higher education institutions in order to shape preservice programs that align with the new early childhood unified license requirements, and higher education preparation programs have begun using the revised standards.

The work group on early childhood held a conference for policymakers in September 2002. The purpose was to increase coordination across numerous early intervention policies and initiatives. (Another conference for educators provided information on readiness.) The goal of the conference, which was coordinated by the Division of Early Childhood and the Department of Education, was to define one set of school readiness indicators. In addition, the Kansas early childhood work group developed a school readiness strand at the Kansas Division for Early Childhood Annual Conference.

As a result of the feedback and input from multiple constituencies, the group developed a readiness brochure, an early childhood fact sheet, and an early childhood resource directory. These materials have been disseminated in printed form and have been posted on an early literacy website designed to provide parents with access to information that can help them help their children.[24]

The Kansas board of education approved a unified teacher licensure system for early childhood teachers, birth through age eight, that underscored the state's commitment to inclusion. Many of the grant activities centered around the state's development of a common definition of school readiness and a single set of standards and indicators for Head Start programs, child care, and IDEA services and programs.

The grant provided the resources to address activities related to rolling out the proposed definition of school readiness and fulfilled the purposes of multiple stakeholders. By including Early Head Start, Head Start, the Head Start Collaboration Project, and Kansas' Head Start Association, the state has successfully created an initial framework that is aligned to the federal performance standards for early childhood programs.

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Ohio

Although Ohio has a number of comprehensive early childhood programs for young children and their families, those programs tend to be fragmented. The state board of education has established a vision of an integrated service delivery system for children. The planning grant enabled the state board and the Department of Education to see how current policy lined up with the board's vision. Under the direction of the Commissioner of Education, a formal hearing was conducted in order to place the issues that were central to providing quality education and care services to children with and without disabilities before key policymaking participants. The policy panel format ensured that board members, legislators, and service agencies beyond the Ohio Department of Education could hear directly from parents and service providers.

The hearing increased awareness of the importance of continued collaboration at the state, regional, and local levels. It allowed for the provision of a great deal of information on how to maximize services and simplify and coordinate service provision for children and their families. Early childhood staff within the Department of Education are reviewing the five hundred pages of testimony that resulted. The transcript of the testimony will be released as a secondary document. One salient point that emerged from that testimony was the need to change the role of itinerant service providers in order to create higher-quality and more inclusive programs.

Some of the primary topics addressed included:

- Coordinating planning and delivery of services.
- Providing professional development and technical assistance.
- Developing and sustaining family-centered systems.
- Defining inclusive settings and practices.
- Providing information that will help child care decisionmakers assess needs and allocate resources.

The hearing funded by the grant will serve as the basis for an iterative process of formulating state policy and coordinating early childhood initiatives. For example, Ohio has developed Special Education Regional Resource Centers (SERRCs) that provide technical assistance and training to all Head Start, preschool, and child care providers who serve young children with special needs. The policy panel document, once reviewed by the board, can inform the Office of Early Childhood Education and the SERRCs concerning the direction of professional development initiatives and tools designed to improve the quality of service provision.

Massachusetts

Massachusetts has a history of cross-agency collaboration. However, follow-up interviews and evaluations indicated that the initial conference, held in spring 2001, provided a broader understanding of how preschool and day care initiatives interface with both IDEA Part B and C provisions. The team that attended the conference focused primarily on transition issues between Part B and Part C services.

The grant activities tied in well with the state improvement grant. The NASBE early childhood planning grant paid for a consultant to work with the Department of Public Health, Early Learning Services, the Office of Childcare Services, and the Department of Education to identify best transition practices. By bringing in multiple agencies, the state's work was informed by a range of perspectives and options for delivering a coordinated system of services. The information gathered has led to increased understanding of the current levels of practice, knowledge of partner agencies, understanding of mandates and requirements, and recognition of the need for change.

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The Department of Health in summer 2002 received the final draft of a guidebook—*Best Practices in Early Childhood Transitions Guide*—that outlines best practices to facilitate a seamless transition.[25] The state board of education approved the guidebook for widespread dissemination in June 2002. Interagency partners at the local level are holding forums on early childhood transitions during the 2002-2003 school year. Participating teams consist of representatives of public schools, early intervention, Head Start, childcare, parents, and other early childhood agencies.

Massachusetts intends to coordinate across programs such as universal preschool and programs provided under IDEA. The state is interested in expanding its concept of an infrastructure to include children with and without disabilities. It also is examining how to broaden its vision of a comprehensive early childhood education system to include private daycare and other providers.

Illinois

Illinois began its work by forming a committee that included state board members; representatives from Head Start, the Head Start Migrant Program, the Head Start Collaborative Program, the Department of Child and Family Services, and the Department of Health and Human Services; and a representative from the governor's office. The committee met three times to review the federal and state mandates that addressed inclusion for each agency. Committee members developed an outline for the document and worked with a writer contracted from the University of Illinois to generate specific content on including children with disabilities in preschool placements.

Although Illinois has a history of providing early education services, concerns exist about the lack of inclusive practices for children with disabilities. The major grant objective was to increase local awareness and understanding about serving young children with disabilities in community environments. To that end, the state developed a guidebook on Child Find and the use of community placements. The guidebook, *One of Us: Access and Equity for All Young Children*, is designed for use by special education directors, early childhood special education coordinators, school superintendents, Head Start administrators and staff, early intervention providers, and child care directors.[26] Its purpose is to:

- Increase awareness of how multiple federal and state initiatives support collaboration and inclusive practices.
- Expand the implementation of high-quality inclusive and collaborative practices.
- Increase access to alternate, high-quality options for young children with disabilities and their families.

The state board paid for the cost of printing and publishing 6,000 copies for dissemination during the summer of 2002, subsequent to its final approval. The state team also piloted a training curriculum for identifying and working with preschool children with special needs in 2002, using discretionary funds from the Office of Special Education early intervention program.

The authority of the state board of education was critical in increasing local awareness of the importance of serving young children with disabilities. Its involvement provided an impetus toward specific action on the part of local agencies and providers. The state, in its final report, said that each of the participating constituencies viewed the development of the guidebook as just the beginning of the effort to enhance services to young children with disabilities and their families.[27]

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Emergent Themes

Project staff identified several major themes as a result of the interviews and focus sessions that were conducted with the states during the course of the year. The states pointed to the following as factors that contributed to the success of the project:

- The initial conference provided participants with the opportunity to benefit from the expertise of the presenters and to work collaboratively on specific action planning. States gave high marks to the conference presenters and materials—including a CD-ROM developed by the PMP and NASBE that provided extensive information on state preschool initiatives, provisions under IDEA, and research on early literacy. Learning about the research on effective practices as well as about the work of other states provided a sound foundation to begin action planning. Requiring states to engage in focused action planning during the conference helped the teams mobilize joint efforts.

- As part of the application process, states were required to establish working partnerships that included policymakers and staff from a wide range of agencies charged with administering early childhood education programs and services. These collaborative networks typically were multitiered. For example, Louisiana required parishes applying for prekindergarten funding grants to establish local partnerships among Head Start programs, public schools, and private care providers. States conducted forums with a wide range of policy bodies at the state, regional, and local levels in order to obtain input from state service coordinators, regional and local service providers, and families. Because the project focused on comprehensive education for children with and without disabilities, states were required to document how they included parents of children with disabilities in the collaborative networks. In addition, the states reported that the information presented at the conference provided a broader understanding of how preschool and services for special populations under IDEA provisions could be coordinated.

- The state boards of education involved in the project played an important role in leveraging authority to develop coordinated systems, reduce turf issues, garner public goodwill, codify standards and indicators, and support widespread dissemination of documents. State board participation mobilized state agencies and local service providers to actively pursue strategies to coordinate high-quality programs and services. In addition, formal policy panels, meetings with cross-agency

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staff, and reports by independent evaluators and consultants provided board members with additional information about early childhood education issues. For example, in Wyoming, the participating board members reported to the full board regarding their progress in establishing a database on early childhood programs and services and how that information could inform policy. Board members now are working to educate the legislature and the public in order to gain support for early childhood investments that previously had been met with resistance.

- The team approach was essential in introducing a range of perspectives, aligning efforts to provide quality programs and services, and maximizing resources. A number of states reported that, prior to the conference, staff from different agencies had never met to discuss the coordination of comprehensive services. Certainly, the majority of state team members had not met with state board members to address common issues associated with providing high-quality preschool programs and services to children with and without disabilities. In some states where there had been ongoing discussions across departments, no action had been taken to address the problems associated with fragmentation in early childhood education.

- The grant served as an incentive to act. It also provided sufficient seed money to support cross-agency activities. The states indicated that, without the funding, such activities would not have happened. Even though only a small amount of funding was provided, it was sufficient to establish coordinating mechanisms and an infrastructure. Wyoming, for example, reported that when agencies recognized the benefit to their particular constituencies in achieving outcomes, they were willing to merge funds to continue development and maintenance of the database. A consultant from Kansas said, "The grant was a shot in the arm. It allowed us to concentrate on key issues and expand the nature and extent of our partnerships with key players. It pushed us to action rather than just discussions. The school readiness initiative has been among the most satisfying work I've done in my 20+ years in early childhood."

- Although the grant period ended in August 2002, states said they intended to continue working with the policymakers and cross-agency partners. During 2002-2003, states are pilot testing the new curriculum, guidelines, and standards that were developed as project deliverables. It is particularly important, given the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, to keep the issue of high-quality early childhood education on state agendas. States reported the need to work proactively with policymakers to help them make the connection between early childhood education and the new federal mandates. During the November focus groups, state boards emphasized the importance of prevention versus remediation. Early intervention allows screening and rescreening children to assess risk factors and tailor programs and services based on individual needs.

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Discussion

The framework for the Early Childhood Education Network was based on engaging state teams, lead by state board members, in thinking about how to develop comprehensive, coherent early childhood systems. States established the vision for their projects at the initial conference. This vision evolved as dialogues with multiple agencies and stakeholders revealed differences in language, basic assumptions, and practices. The engagement of key stakeholders was essential to identifying specific issues and fleshing out how to integrate and consolidate resources and information. It was important to assess the status of the state early childhood education system and what was needed to move forward. States used the overall vision as a starting point and then worked on specific areas (e.g., funding, brokering services, identifying best practices for inclusion, transition points, and evaluating outcomes).

This results-oriented process guided the creation and work of the Network. It required states to commit to a team approach, establish ongoing collaborative partnerships to align federal and state policies and programs, and develop and implement specific action plans to address specific components of state service systems. The states emphasized the effectiveness of NASBE's multi-step strategy in addressing the issue of how to consolidate and align federal and state resources to ensure that all children have access to high-quality early education programs. All of the grant recipients concurred that the combination of the conference, the grant, NASBE's ongoing follow-up, and the provision of technical assistance resources led to successful project outcomes.

Although the award was limited to $10,000, all states achieved their project goals. Many noted that while there had been discussion about the need to collaborate and address conflicting guidelines and standards, little action had been taken prior to the award. All of the states said they intended to sustain and expand the work set in motion during the grant period. They were able to gain the commitment from policymakers and agencies to provide additional resources and support that would allow them to continue their efforts.

States that had fewer institutionalized systems for providing early childhood services adopted broader strategic visions for how to consolidate and integrate delivery systems. States with longer track records of funding early childhood programs outlined grant activities that were narrower in scope. Typically, these activities required cross-agency partnerships that were more formal and limited. More study is needed to determine if the degree of prior institutionalization for program administration acts as a barrier to increasing the extent to which services are coordinated.

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The state board of education played a central role in ensuring that each state achieved its project objectives. There are several reasons why state boards are uniquely positioned to address issues of quality in early childhood services: First, they have broad oversight for education standards and licensure. Second, state boards have become increasingly interested in early childhood education as it relates to increased accountability for student achievement. Given the connection between school readiness and subsequent student achievement, state boards are expending more time and attention on the issues related to quality early childhood education for all children. Project evaluations have indicated that the role of the state board of education was indeed significant. It leveraged its authority to strengthen partnerships, create a common vision, codify a single set of standards and readiness indicators, and establish requirements for personnel certification and professional development.

The passage of No Child Left Behind has resulted in an increasing focus on early childhood education as a means for offsetting the wide variance in children's developmental profiles upon school entry. These differences follow children throughout their years of schooling. They can have a dramatic impact on long-term educational outcomes. It is imperative that states develop strategic approaches to creating comprehensive, high-quality early childhood education programs.

The framework developed through this project represents a conceptual shift. It promotes a shared vision that can drive the planning and implementation of coordinated programs and services. It has proven itself to be extremely effective in translating research into policy and practice. It has provided a foundation for mapping policy and program development. State action plans have culminated in sustained initiatives that inform policy and practice at the local level. The model offers an effective approach to increasing access to quality early education programs and services. Finally, the collaborative approach discussed here is applicable across a wide range of key education and health issues that are linked to children's well being and success in school.

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